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Freight train cars derail, burn in northern Ill.

Associated Press

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BARTLETT, Ill.—

A freight train derailment in Chicago's western suburbs sparked a large fire and disrupted the commute for residents along one of **Metra**'s lines.

Canadian National Railway spokesman Patrick Waldron says 22 cars on a north-bound train derailed at about 5:30 a.m. Thursday. Waldron says two of those cars carried hazardous materials, but those cars didn't leak or catch on fire.

Bartlett Police Sgt. Geoffrey Pretkelis (preht-KEHL'-ihs) says the three derailed cars that burned were carrying fiberboard and scrap metal.

Nobody was injured in the incident, which happened in an industrial area near Bartlett -- about 30 miles west of Chicago.

Freight Train Derails in Elgin

Milwaukee West Line Metra trains have been canceled until further notice

By Staff Report



A northbound Canadian National freight train derailed after 5 a.m. at the railroad connection shared with Milwaukee West Metra trains between Elgin and downtown. A freight train derailed early Thursday just west of Bartlett, causing severe Metra delays. A northbound Canadian National freight train derailed after 5 a.m. at the railroad connection shared with Milwaukee West Metra trains between Elgin and downtown, transit officials said.

No injuries were reported.

The train derailed on the border of Elgin and Bartlett at Lambert Lane and Spaulding Road, fire officials said. Helicopter footage from Sky 5 showed more than 18 cars overturned and hazmat crews on the scene and firefighters from surrounding communities battling an on-and-off blaze.

As of 7:40 a.m., the fire was struck and cleanup slowly began.



Train Derail Cleanup Begins



RAW: Freight Train Derailment Aftermath

More Multimedia

According to early reports, some cars were carrying hazardous materials, but all materials were contained in the cars, according to Bartlett fire officials, and were not spilled. Nearby residents were not evacuated.

Milwaukee District West Line Metra trains west of Bartlett were stalled and held at the Big Timber station. Riders were shuttled to moving trains east of the derailment. North Central Service, which shares the same line from River Grove to Chicago, will make all stops between the two to accommodate passengers, Metra spokeswoman Meg Reile said.

The Milwaukee West line could be stalled over the weekend.

Source: http://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/133141208.html#ixzz1ck6la4pB

Freight train derails near Elgin, closes down Metra service

By Dave Gathman dgathman@stmedianetwork.com November 3, 2011 6:52AM

BARTLETT — Except for a limited bus-shuttle connection, Metra rail service to Elgin will remain out of commission until at least Friday morning after a fiery freight-train wreck on an intersecting line totally blocked the commuter service's Milwaukee West Line before dawn Thursday. And because most locomotives and cars devoted to the Milwaukee West Line remained trapped in Elgin, on the far side of the wreck, even passenger service between Bartlett and Chicago was expected to be minimal until at least Friday.

CN Railway spokesman Patrick Waldron said 22 cars of a northbound CN freight derailed and three caught fire near Lambert Lane and Spaulding Road, in an unincorporated area along the Elgin-Bartlett border. The derailment occurred about 5 a.m. No one was injured and there was no known damage to any buildings. The derailment occurred on a north-south CN rail line (the former Elgin, Joliet & Eastern line) where it crosses the east-west Milwaukee West commuter line. Once an independent unincorporated town known as "Spaulding" that was a commuter-train stop itself 30 years ago, the area now includes auto scrap yards, other industrial buildings, a gravel quarry and an Ameren Energy "peaker" power-generating plant with storage tanks for fuel oil. "Interlocking" tracks at Spaulding allow trains to move between the two railroads, and both lines have small rail yards where freight cars are stored on sidings while waiting to be transferred.

Waldron said Thursday afternoon that railroad officials are not sure what caused the derailment. But the area includes many switches connecting the various sidings and interlocking tracks to each other.

Almost all commuter trains used on the Milwaukee West Line are stored overnight in downtown Elgin, so the wreck cut them off from being used anywhere between Spaulding and Chicago. Metra spokesman Michael Gillis said two train sets were east of Elgin at the time of the wreck and were offering limited service through the day Thursday, shuttling back and forth between Bartlett and Chicago Union Station. Metra also arranged for buses to carry passengers between Bartlett and the Elgin stations and for some trains from other lines to fill in on the Milwaukee West Line during the Thursday-night rush hour.

But this handful of equipment east of the wreck falls short of enough capacity to serve the thousands of riders who normally use the Milwaukee West Line, so Gillis urged Elgin-area commuters to consider the Union Pacific West Line (Geneva to Chicago) or Union Pacific Northwest Line (Crystal Lake to Chicago) as alternatives, or to drive themselves to Bartlett if possible. "Inbound trains will not wait for the arrival of the bus" between Elgin and Bartlett, Metra's website warned. "Passengers may experience lengthy wait times up to two hours."

Gillis said commuters should consult www.metrarail.com to see what level of service will be available Thursday evening and Friday. He said much will depend on how fast workers can remove the 22 wrecked freight cars, and on how much damage to the Metra tracks will be revealed when the wreckage is moved aside.

Firefighters and police from Bartlett, Elgin and the Cook County Sheriff's Office were on the scene all day. Elgin police spokeswoman Sue Olafson said the first indication of an emergency came at 5:09 a.m., when someone called the Elgin 911 center to report that one of the industrial businesses in the Spaulding area seemed to be on fire. Elgin firefighters responded but soon realized it was a wrecked train that was burning.

Bartlett Police Sgt. Geoffrey Pretkelis said none of the three cars that caught fire contained hazardous materials. One was empty and the other two contained scrap metal and fiberboard, he said.

Waldron said two of the derailed cars did contain hazardous materials — strongly alkaline sodium hydroxide (also known as lye) and the industrial chemical ferric sulfate. But these cars were not leaking, did not burn and pose no danger, he said.

Eight hours after the crash, smoke could still be seen rising from the disabled train. But Pretkelis said a locomotive had pulled 90 of the freight cars southward by then, away from the derailed part of the train.

No nearby businesses or homes were evacuated. But two roads remained shut off Thursday afternoon — Spaulding Road between Rose Lane and Gifford Road, and Lambert Lane between Spaulding Road and Versailles Drive.

The usually bustling National Street commuter parking lot in Elgin looked deserted at 8 a.m. while sidings in the Metra coachyard between National and Chicago streets remained filled with empty trains.

"I take the train every morning to my job in a warehouse in Wood Dale," a frustrated commuter named Joe said. "But when I got here, there was just a P.A. announcement that there had been a train wreck and there would be no service from Elgin. I'll have to call a guy who works with me and lives in Elgin, to see if I can hitch a ride in his car."

Another marooned commuter, who rides Metra to classes at DePaul University in Chicago, welcomed the accident as a chance to take a day off from school.

Waldron didn't know how many total cars were on the train or where it was going to and from. CN uses the former EJ&E route to shuttle freight trains around the outside of the congested Chicago area, connecting such other CN-owned routes as the Grand Trunk Western line to Michigan, the former Illinois Central line to New Orleans, the former Illinois Central line to Iowa (via Plato Center and Burlington), and the former Wisconsin Central line to Wisconsin and western Canada.

The Canadian Pacific Railway also uses the Metra line to carry several of its freight trains per day from its Kansas City/Omaha line to its yard in Bensenville.

Just before 7 a.m., Elgin School District U46 emailed its families and employees there would be "significant delays in transportation" Thursday morning because of the derailment. U46 serves both Elgin and Bartlett.

In that message, U46 Safety Coordinator John Heiderscheidt said he had been in contact with local police and fire departments. Buses and other traffic could be delayed, but schools would work to get late students to class as soon as possible, Heiderscheidt said.

Otherwise, according to U46 spokesman Tony Sanders, "All schools are open. It didn't affect us in any way other than delaying some buses."

Staff writer Emily McFarlan contributed to this story.

Metra service to Elgin expected to resume Friday



Smoke rises from a three-car train derailment near the Elgin-Bartlett border Thursday morning. Two of the cars that derailed contained hazardous materials, though officials say no chemicals were released.

BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



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Cleanup starts Thursday along the Milwaukee District West Line which was shut down in both directions near Elgin after 22 cars of a Canadian National freight train went off the tracks about 5:30 a.m.

BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

By Jessica Cilella and Christopher Placek

It was around 5:30 a.m. Thursday morning when a frightening sound snapped Bartlett resident Leslie Andrle out of a deep sleep.

"It was a loud boom ... like something just wasn't right, like it was a rough turn of a train or something," said Andrle, who lives by the ninth hole of the Villa Olivia Country Club.

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Friday's Milwaukee West schedule

Metra advises passengers to check the Metra website to make sure plans have not been revised.

All Milwaukee West Line trains may operate 20 to 30 minutes behind schedule.

- Trains 2201 and 2203 will stop at Bartlett. A bus will carry passengers to National Street, Elgin, and Big Timber stations (2201 passengers only).
- Milwaukee North Train 2122 will not operate.
- All passengers from Lake-Cook Road, North Glenview and all stops from Edgebrook to Healy should plan on either riding 2118 approximately 20 minutes earlier or 2126 arriving at Chicago 35 minutes later.
- Passengers normally boarding Train 2122 at stations from Fox Lake to Deerfield, and also Morton Grove, should ride Train 2124, which operates approximately 10 minutes later.
- NCS Train 106 will not operate. Train 108 will make all scheduled stops to the O'Hare Transfer, then express to River Grove, making stops at Western Avenue and Chicago. This train may operate up to 15 minutes behind schedule.

Moments later, the sounds of sirens and hovering news helicopters filled the air.

What Andrle and other Bartlett residents heard was 22 cars of a Canadian National freight train careening off the rails near Gifford and Spaulding roads at the Elgin-Bartlett border.

No injuries were reported.

The accident, which occurred close to where a Metra line intersects with a former EJ&E line now owned by Canadian National, disrupted service on Metra's Milwaukee District West Line all day Thursday, but Metra expected to have trains running to Elgin on Friday.

"Essentially, Milwaukee West commuters can expect service tomorrow," said Metra spokesman Tom Miller. A service update was posted at metra.com Thursday evening. Riders should expect delays of 20 to 30 minutes, as commuter trains would find "slow going around the derailment," Miller said.

Canadian National spokesman Patrick Waldron said the cause of the derailment — which involved a single 120-car northbound freight train traveling from Gary, Ind., to Fond du Lac, Wis. — is unknown and that an investigation is ongoing. Thursday evening he said the railway was concentrating on clearing at least one track for Metra trains.

But Chip Pew, director of the Illinois Commerce Commission's railroad safety program Operation Lifesaver, said preliminary indications are that a piece of broken rail contributed to the accident.

Two of the derailed cars were tankers that contained hazardous materials in liquid form — sodium hydroxide, or lye, and ferrous sulfite — but no chemicals were released as a result of the derailment, authorities said.

Three other derailed cars caught on fire. One contained scrap metal, another fiberboard, and one was empty. Fire crews extinguished the fire by Thursday afternoon.

Bartlett Fire Chief Michael Falese said water from hose lines created the impression there was a vapor cloud, but it was merely mist.

"At no time was there any vapor cloud whatsoever, or any danger to the community, or even our people on the scene in regards to the hazardous materials," Falese said.

The derailment occurred in an industrial area, which limited the danger to residents.

Bartlett Village President Michael Kelly said while police deemed the area around the crash site to be safe, officials were prepared to evacuate people in a mobile home park near the tracks if necessary.

"That's a very key portion of our community and that's very important to me that those people are safe," Kelly said.

Metra said about 11,000 people use the Milwaukee District West Line daily, but those most affected by the derailment were the 2,000 or so riders who use the three Elgin stops west of Bartlett that were closed Thursday. Service east of Bartlett also was affected because several trains still were parked in Elgin when the derailment occurred and couldn't be used.

While shuttle buses were running from the Bartlett train station to Elgin, none were going from Elgin to Bartlett, leaving commuters scrambling.

Richard Lawson, a recently laid-off warehouse manager from Joliet, came to Elgin in hopes of selling his plasma for \$40. His plan was to use the money to turn his cellular phone back on. But that plan didn't pan out because his blood needed to be tested first.

Then, an already disappointed Lawson found himself stuck at Metra's Big Timber Road station in Elgin. But he, along with his bike, managed to hitch a ride to the Bartlett train station with perfect strangers who had come to the station to pick up their stranded daughter.

"Praise God some Christians gave me a ride," said Lawson, who began his commute at 5 a.m. in Aurora, taking two buses to get to Elgin.

Bill Pelz of Chicago teaches history at Elgin Community College and was late to work by the time he got the bus from Bartlett. He ended up rescheduling some meetings, with plans to stay in Elgin until the trains started running again.

But after he received notice that Metra suspended its service to and from Elgin, he called one of his ECC colleagues and got a ride to the Bartlett station, where he boarded the train that left at 11:40 a.m. He planned to spend the rest of his day working from home.

Pelz has been taking the Metra train to ECC for more than 10 years and knows to expect the unexpected.

"I'm kind of going with the flow," Pelz said. "I mean, these things happen."

Transportation for Elgin Area School District U-46 was also affected, resulting in district officials sending out a recorded message Thursday morning warning of busing delays as the district scrambled to route buses around closed roads.

John Heiderscheidt, the district's coordinator of school safety and security, said of the 26,000 students in the district eligible for transportation, perhaps 30 were late.

• Staff writers Lenore Adkins, Larissa Chinwah, Marni Pyke and Susan Sarkauskas contributed to this report.

Derailment raises old fears of EJ&E/CN merger

By Marni Pyke

There's a good chance the freight train that's detaining you at the local railroad crossing contains hazardous materials.

It's a common occurrence that generally goes unremarked until an incident such as Thursday's derailment of a Canadian National train in Bartlett that involved two tankers containing sodium hydroxide, or lye, and ferrous sulfite.

No toxic substances leaked out, but the accident resonated with local leaders who opposed CN's merger in 2009 with the smaller EJ&E Railroad, which extends through numerous north, west and south suburbs.

"It underscores the need to make the EJ&E as safe as possible, to reduce potential hazards and to reduce the chance for another freight accident," said Barrington Mayor Karen Darch, who led a coalition of towns in fighting the merger.

Federal regulators approved the deal because they agreed with CN's rationale that moving trains from its lines in Chicago onto the less-traveled EJ&E would ease a notorious freight bottleneck in the region.

"CN invests heavily in the latest safety technology in the rail industry," railroad spokesman Patrick Waldron said. "We monitor the tracks and equipment across the system, including the EJ&E where we've made a heavy investment."

The U.S. Surface Transportation Board acknowledged that the transaction "would increase the risk of an accident involving the discharge of a hazardous material along the EJ&E line and decreases this risk along the CN lines into Chicago." But the agency noted the risk of spill was low and federal hazmat transport rules along with CN's system of safeguards would be adequate to prevent a catastrophe.

Authorities don't yet know what caused the derailment, which set three train cars on fire.

A look at September numbers provided by CN showed train traffic on the EJ&E line between the Mundelein area and south of Naperville has increased by about 35 percent since the 2009 merger.

Across Illinois, there were 119 derailments, ranging from minor to major incidents, involving all railroads in 2010, according to the Federal Railroad Administration's database. Of those, nine involved CN trains. As a comparison, Union Pacific had 39 derailments and the BNSF Railroad had 32.

FRA data from January through August 2011 indicates there were 17 derailments involving trains carrying hazardous materials in Illinois. Of those, one case in Iroquois County involved a release of hazardous materials.

Of the 17 derailments with trains transporting hazmat goods, four involved CN, two involved BNSF and six were UP trains.

Another incident, not on the database yet, occurred Oct. 7 in northern Illinois near Tiskilwa, where a derailed lowa Interstate Railroad freight train carrying ethanol exploded and caused a mass evacuation.

Darch said she was thankful there were no injuries in the Bartlett accident, unlike a June 2009 derailment of a CN train carrying ethanol in Rockford where an explosion and fire killed a woman and injured her family.

"There's a need to make sure (police and fire) are trained and understand what's on the train and are prepared to respond, she noted.

"Since acquiring the EJ&E, CN has worked with municipalities across the route in emergency response training," Waldron said. "We made sure those lines of cooperation were open today."

Aurora Mayor Tom Weisner, whose community is host to EJ&E — now CN — tracks said the recent derailment left him uneasy.

"I wouldn't say I have a great comfort level," Weisner said, adding that CN freight traffic is only going to increase. "We are certainly concerned about what the future will bring."

Railroad expert James Wilson of Naperville said the transport of hazardous materials is common across the country and there's an ongoing effort to ensure safety.

"Over the last couple of years, there's been a complete review of tank car safety standards and construction," said Wilson, a principal consultant on railroads for Infosys Ltd.

Railroads, trucks and barges carry hazmat items "because these materials make up all sorts of consumer products everyone uses. There's a demand for these products and they're shipped in vessels that are designed the best way they can be to withstand the rigors of any accident," Wilson said.

"While there's not a 100 percent guarantee everything will be safe, our safety record for hazardous materials in North America is way beyond anything (elsewhere)."